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AUTHOR Baruchson-Arbib, Shifra
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ABSTRACT

This paper evaluates the success of a new specialization in library science, Social Information Science, developed by the author at Bar-Ilan University (Israel). The aim of Social Information is to expand the role of the library, to build new Social Information Banks, and to create a new profession, Social Information Scientist. The paper describes the conception and curriculum of the Bar-Ilan University program and then analyzes a survey that was carried out among the students. Results show that the students are interested in the subject--20-25% of them chose to learn Social Information. However, in practice, only 15% of the graduates apply their new knowledge at work. In considering the fact that there is no formal profession of a Social Information Scientist in Israel, these figures show the beginning of interest in the subject. (Contains 23 references.) (MES)



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Curriculum for "Social Information Science" - evaluation and application

Shifra Baruchson-Arbib

Department of Information Science, Bar-Ilan University

Ramat Gan, Israel

E-mail: baruchs1@mail.biu.ac.il

A.L. Van Wesemael

Abstract

This article evaluates the success of a new specialization in Library Science "Social Information Science" - as it was implied in Bar-Ilan University, Israel. This specialty was developed by the author and its theory is described in her book, Social Information Science (1996). The aim of Social Information is to expand the social role of the library, to build new Social Information Banks, and to create a new profession - "Social Information Scientist". This paper analyzes a survey that was carried out among the students. It clearly shows that the students are interested in the subject - 20-25% of them chose to learn Social Information. However, in practice, only 15% of the graduates apply their new knowledge at work. In considering the fact that there is no formal profession of a Social Information Scientist in Israel, these figures show the beginning of interest in this important subject.

Paper

Introduction - What is Social Information Science?

Social Information Science is a new specialization in the framework of information studies and librarianship. It deals with the study of applications and development of all the elements connected to the retrieval and processing of

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social and medical information, including the study of society's information needs, the characteristics of data retrieval sources, data processing methods, the ethics of providing information, the development of institutions such as social and medical information banks, and the creation of the new professional: the Social Information Scientist. This discipline was developed by the author of this paper as a special expertise for M.A. students in the Department of Information Science in Bar-Ilan University, Israel. The theoretical and scientific basis of the subject was covered at length in her book: *Social Information Science - Love, Health and the Information Society - The Challenge of the 21st Century* (Sussex Academic Press, Brighton, 1996).¹

The basic assumption behind the need to develop this new field is that in addition to the technological efforts and inventions that characterize the information society, we also need to develop the humanitarian and social aspects of the new society emerging before us. In a pioneer article about electronic publishing (1978), T.H. Nelson noted: "The paper world we lived in for so long may and perhaps should be supplanted by an electronic counterpart. But in this transformation, we have a chance to improve the world - a one time chance."²

The basic premise of the new field is that modern man needs two types of social information for his well-being: (a) direct information, such as: names of institutions, public and voluntary aid organizations, support groups, information on medical treatments and preventive medicine, etc.; and (b) supportive knowledge - meaning the knowledge and information found in literature, movies and poetry, from which man can draw comfort, support, insight, a new way of looking at problems, and original solutions found and tried by others. Social and medical information, when transmitted in a reliable and empathetic manner along with detailed explanations, will give modern man emotional and social stability, and reduce stress as much as possible.

Just as in the 20th century new academic disciplines have been established (e.g., psychology, criminology, educational guidance counseling, business management, computer sciences and others), now, at the threshold of the 21st century, it is important and worthwhile to create a new profession appropriate to the spirit of the times and the needs of society. The 20th century put man's social needs on the stage of scientific research. The 21st century should continue to find solutions for these needs by using new technology and new information channels to give man an anchor that will enable him to take responsibility for his life, to be involved in decisions affecting his life and to choose his best options. During the last 20 years, we have witnessed a growing awareness of this subject through the rise of new issues and projects such as: patient education, preventive medicine, the establishment of medical information centers in hospitals, and the development of referral services in public libraries, all of which prove that there is a need for social and medical information.³

The concept of using information and literature for the benefit of society is not new, as proven in the fields of bibliotherapy and psychoneuroimmunology.⁴ In addition, there are a lot of different social, practical activities that are not sufficiently known to the general public.⁵ What then is the innovation in the new field of Social Information Science? First, its interdisciplinary approach, which combines three elements: information technology, literature (in printed and electronic form) and the public's need for social and medical information; second, its application in library science as a unique expertise with the purpose of educating a new generation of qualified, responsible Social Information Scientists. As responsibility and credibility are essential in such a delicate field such as social information, creating a formal and recognized profession will

prevent the penetration of nonprofessionals into this field.

The conception of the Bar-Ilan University program

The official purpose of Social Information Science is to create institutions called social and medical information banks, and a new professional - the Social Information Scientist, as the author explains in detail in her book (1996). The process of the entry of a new profession into society involves slow stages of trial and error. This phenomenon was taken into consideration during the development of the program. It was also clear that transforming the librarian into a Social Information Scientist will not be an easy task in light of the librarian's conservative image and low library budgets. On the other hand, it is obvious that the public and school libraries should look for new challenges in wake of the decline of reading books and the expansion of new information technologies. Taking all these assumptions into consideration, the Bar-Ilan University program has 3 aims: 1) the training of new librarians (Social Information Scientists) for hospitals, nursing and rehabilitation institutions; 2) educating specialists to develop self-help sections and social information banks in public and school libraries, community centers, and local municipalities; 3) the encouragement of talented students to develop private initiatives in the field of social information. It has been explained from the start to all those who register for the program that this is a new field and that there is no Social Information Science profession in Israel yet.

The Information Science Department in Bar-Ilan is the largest department of its kind in Israel (550 students) and its aim is to promote new fields in order to help Israeli society become an advanced information society. Social information is one of its new projects, in addition to other programs: Information Management, Information Science, and Administration of Public and School Libraries.

Curriculum for Social Information Science

The program began in 1993 as an M.A. specialization and includes two options: 1. Program with a thesis (27 credits including 2 seminars) and; 2. Program without a thesis (37 credits including 3 seminars). Students with B.A. degrees in librarianship were exempt from taking the introductory courses (13 credits). The program lasts 2-4 years. Only outstanding students with B.A. degrees in the social sciences were accepted.

The new specialization is based on an interdisciplinary approach and is built on four components:

1. Basic courses in information science and librarianship (such as: data retrieval, cataloguing, classification, etc.).
2. Basic courses in psychology: "Introduction to Psychology" and an introductory course in group dynamics.
3. Study of the therapeutic aspects of all kinds of communication media: books, poetry, movies, internet sites, etc. (bearing in mind different age groups: children, adolescents, adults and senior citizens).
4. Studies of the potential applications of the new specialization in existing frameworks such as schools, public libraries, and libraries in hospitals, nursing and rehabilitation centers, as well as in new frameworks such as management of new social information banks.

The following is the program curriculum. Please note that each year there are some changes made according to lessons learned during the course of the

previous year.

Introductory courses: 13 credits

Name of course	Credits*
Introduction to information science	1
Introduction to computers	1
Research methods and statistics	2
Introduction to reference work	1
Cataloguing methods	1
Classification methods	1
Computer services in libraries	1
On-line data retrieval	2
Internet resources	1
Marketing of information services	1
Organizational behavior	1

Specialization: Social Information Science

Required introductory courses: 4 credits

Introduction to psychology	2
Group dynamics	2

Specialization courses: 8 credits required for thesis program; 17 credits for non-thesis program

Library services for special populations	1
Medical bibliotherapy in health care institutions	1
Literature and movies as means of support and insight	2
Bibliotherapy for senior citizens	1
Bibliotherapy for children	1
Advanced course in bibliotherapy for senior citizens	1
Bibliotherapeutic evaluation of children's literature	1
Data bases in the social sciences	1
Social information in social services	1
Evaluation of reading abilities	1
Basic skills of the Digital Information Scientist	1
Copyright and ethical issues	1
Elective courses on other subjects	4

Required seminars: 2 credits for thesis program; 3 credits for non-thesis program

Social Information Science	1
Scientific research in librarianship	1
Information systems in educational institutions	1

* 1 credit = 30 hours of learning = 1 semester.

Evaluation and application - data and methods

After 6 years of activity, it is time to evaluate the success and practical application of the new field. From the point of view of the department, it is a success. During all these years, from 20-25% of the students have chosen this specialization despite the fact that it has been made clear to them that this is a new program and there is no guarantee that they will find jobs at this stage. Most of the students have chosen the program without a thesis since it offers a greater selection of credits, a fact that allows them to obtain widespread knowledge in other areas of information as well and will enable them to find jobs in the future in various places.

What is the academic profile of the students? Ninety-nine percent of them are women between the ages of 30 and 50. They all have B.A. degrees in the social sciences - education, psychology, social work; some of them also have teaching certificates and a B.A. degree in librarianship. From a professional point of view, most of them are already working: 30% as librarians and the rest as educational counselors and teachers. It was natural for students with a tendency to aid and support, to choose this specialization.

In the middle of 1999, a survey was conducted among the students who had already completed the program in order to evaluate the satisfaction from the program and its success in the field of employment. The survey focussed on four central questions: 1) What motivated the students to register for this specialization; 2) Did the studies influence their awareness to the social aspect of library science and their attitude towards readers; 3) Are they working in the field or have they developed at their places of work special projects such as: self-help sections in libraries, information centers for social services, preparation of a bibliotherapeutic catalogue, preparation of a self-help literature catalogue or social internet site?; 4) Do they have private or public plans to apply it in the future.

The main findings of the survey follow. The survey was sent to 150 students and 73% of them responded. Most of them - 52% - answered that they chose the specialization because it is a new and interesting field. Some of them (19%) responded that their work deals with related topics and their purpose is to develop social information activities within their libraries. 29% of them responded that they intended to learn a new profession and apply it in Israeli society.

Concerning their awareness of the subject, most of them (75%) said that the course expanded their awareness of the social potential of library science and improved their attention to readers' requests. Others (19%) responded that they had previous knowledge. The rest did not respond (6%).

Concerning the central question dealing with the practical aspect, we learned that 17 students (15% of the respondents) are involved with activities related to the new field. Here the answers were very varied and interesting: Four graduates work as teachers in this field. One, who was a member of the first graduating

class and is a physician by profession, is now teaching courses in medical bibliotherapy, bibliotherapy for senior citizens and social information in social services, in our department at Bar-Ilan. This student also has background in psychology and is also active in Israel in aid and welfare frameworks. The second graduate teaches in the department bibliotherapy for children; she is a librarian by profession with an M.A. degree in education. She also specialized in bibliotherapy within other frameworks as well, and now also teaches courses to kindergarten teachers on the subject. The third is a librarian by profession who teaches an introductory bibliotherapy course, as a special extension course for librarians. The fourth, who holds a senior position in Israel in the field of library science, incorporates the subject of social information into her lectures. Two other respondents developed self-help sections for youths within the framework of school libraries. One of these projects, that took place in the town of Or Yehuda, was studied carefully and it clearly showed that this special self-help section contributed to an increase in the amount of reading and heightened interest in books dealing with teenage family problems, drugs, violence, sex, and others.⁶ Two students are jointly building an internet site on the subject of "breast cancer" for an Israeli association for prevention of breast cancer; they received funding for the project from the Ministry of Education. Another respondent, also a leading figure in the field of librarianship, prepared a "literature catalogue" classified according to bibliotherapeutic angles for the Central Library of Tel Aviv. Another respondent built a site for her library and added information on bibliotherapy. Four graduates are now developing data bases in the framework of their jobs in libraries and government projects on the subjects of drugs, information services for senior citizens, television movies - and social values. Yet another graduate is involved in developing a municipal information center in one of the central libraries. Two other graduates are involved in bibliotherapy counseling - one with disabled army veterans, and the other with elderly stroke victims - both under the supervision of psychology experts.

Concerning their plans for the future, 46% responded that they intend to develop the field within the framework of their working place or in a private framework. What about academic research on the subject? Besides articles that were published by the author of this paper, many seminar works have been written in addition to several excellent M.A. theses, for example: "Bibliotherapy and hypermedia", "Self-help literature in Israel 1967-1997", "Research in bibliotherapy - in Israel and the world - Bibliometric analysis", "Social Information in schools for special education", and "Alternative medicine in Israel and the world - Bibliometric analysis".⁷

In addition to the direct results connected to the students of the department, there has also been increased interest in the subject among Israel's librarian organizations. The author was invited to give several lectures in the framework of The Instruction Center for Public Libraries and the Organization of Special Libraries, as well as in the framework of an international conference for school librarians held by the International Association of School Librarianship (1998). Recently, the leading organization dealing with adult education and the development of community centers has been considering developing social information banks in a community center in Israel.

Conclusions

There is no doubt that the issue of social information should be developed and promoted as part of the changes characterizing the information society. But, like any new activity just beginning, the first stages are slow and it takes time for awareness to grow among scholars as well as the general public. From the point

of view of library and information workers, this is a new field of activity, one of great interest and creative potential that in the future will allow the development of social information banks and academic specialists who will serve as certified Social Information Scientists. The very fact that there is so much interest in the subject among library students shows that they are looking for a new and interesting niche to develop in and to contribute to society. However, in the practical sense, development is slow because of lack of budget and lack of awareness of the issue. In this state of affairs, the activities carried out until now are noteworthy, and with a lot of patience, creativity and the right connections, we hope that Social Information Science will accelerate and contribute a humanistic angle to the technological innovations of the information society.

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See above (*ibid.*, notes 1, 6).

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